

*In the
Beginning*



Habonim

1935 1985

Foreword

First there was Junior Poale Zion, then Young Poale Zion, then Young Poale Zion Alliance and then Habonim, Labor Zionist Youth. Always modest, with no pretensions to being a mass movement, Habonim nevertheless intimately touched the lives of thousands of young people. More than two thousand of those who passed through its ranks have come here to live.

As we meet with the President of Israel on this day, the 25th of October, 1984, among us are representatives of every generation of Habonim's leaders; there are members of six kibbutzim and two moshavim that American Habonim helped found; we are residents of cities, towns and villages in all parts of the country. Of different ages, occupations and backgrounds, we all have had one thing in common: the conviction that each of us individually must "arise and build", that Habonim's emblem carries a personal message for each of us.

We open the celebrations marking American Habonim's jubilee year at a very difficult time for Israel and for American Zionism — yet we see ourselves as very fortunate to have been part of this movement.

The following pages recalling the Pegisha held in Accord from August 26th to September 3rd, 1934 and the Buffalo Convention from October 10th to 13th, 1935 will remind us of how it all began...

THE FOUNDING OF HABONIM (1930-1935)

My recollections of the founding of Habonim are drawn from memory since none of us in the 1930's thought of himself as "making history"; none kept diaries, none even recorded systematically the sequence of events. There was a sense of exhilaration and vitality, a thrill of creating something new; but whether it was the natural enthusiasm of our youth or a subconscious realization of importance is a moot question.

We had been under the emotional stress of two traumatic experiences in 1929. Jewishly we were upset by the Palestine riots, during which the Arabs went on a rampage. At the Young Poale Zion convention of 1929 a standing oath was taken by the entire body to go to Palestine within one year. (One person kept the pledge, the then secretary, and he returned after a short period.) On the general scene we were profoundly shaken by the 1929 stock-market crash and the subsequent depression. It is difficult to conceive what a sense of helplessness engulfed the country after the crash. Not only the headlines of tycoons turned paupers, news of millionaire suicides, confusing government statements, wild predictions and premonitions by economists, but gnawing doubts about the very foundation of our society upset every American.

Those of us who were then in the Young Poale Zion had the answers. We knew that Zionism would solve the Jewish problem; socialism, the problem of society as a whole. Our only question was how to carry our message across to the "masses." Fundamentally our problem was that of communication and method.

Moshe Cohen of Minneapolis replaced Shlomo Katz (from St. Paul) as national secretary in 1930. For almost three years he grappled with organizational issues and tried to increase the membership and heighten the enthusiasm. He paid special attention to the younger section, then known as Buds (a translation from the Yiddish *knospen* and symbolizing the verdant blossoming of spring) and Intermediates. He devised an educational system based on much extensive use of the English language. The content was a simplified version of the Poale Zion political program, which was expressed by the triple slogan of "Zionism, Socialism, and Diaspora Emancipation." The older section of the Young Poale Zion Alliance, known as Yugnt (youth), was indistinguishable from the elder Poale Zion except in age and the more

prevalent use of English. The big issue of the 1931 convention was whether the youth publication be entirely in Yiddish or one half in English.

For three years Moshe and his *chaverim* on the national executive committee struggled. Moshe toured the country, taught songs, prodded, worked; but, in the end, he returned home in 1932, exhausted and displeased. I was then studying psychology at the University of Minnesota, and Moshe assumed that I knew something about education. Since I was already a movement veteran of five years' standing, Moshe felt free to pour out his heart to me about the obstacles in the jungle of New York.

Moshe brooded at home. Why had he failed? Why was there no real progress? Was the ideology at fault? Was he personally inadequate? Nachum, Moshe, and I sat up many nights discussing—or, more correctly, listening—to Moshe's emotional and intellectual torment. A member, Yehuda Strimling, had no patience and decided that action was needed. He had seen the Baltimore *bachshara* (training) farm on a recent trip and decided that only a *bachshara* farm could save the movement. There we were, Nachum and I, torn between the dreamer and the man of action. We were all of twenty years old then, totally inadequate to decide the issue; and, torn between the opposing forces, we accepted the inevitable and yielded to both. We worked with Yehuda to involve the whole Jewish community in setting up a farm, and we met with Moshe to talk of education and techniques. We divided our resources; Nachum entered the University agricultural school, and I pursued my psychology. By 1934, both had succeeded. Yehuda had his *bachshara* farm; Moshe Cohen had a memorandum.

In the late summer of 1934, a meeting of the elders of the Young Poale Zion Alliance was convened at Accord, New York, to consider the state of affairs. Membership had declined. Dues income was at an all-time low. It was decided to follow the Palestinian pattern and have a semi-formal gathering called *pegisha*. It would not have the formal authority of a convention, but it would have the advantage of untrammelled discussion and the moral force of the movement leaders' consensus.

Moshe Cohen was ready to return to the national office in New York but only on condition that his memorandum be accepted at the *pegisha*. I was given the memo, and he asked me to present it at

Accord.

What were the essential issues? To begin with, there was the problem of Yiddish. No one denied a fundamentally positive attitude to the folk culture, the literature, the wisdom, tradition, and emotional value of Yiddish. We questioned the practicability of stressing Yiddish as the main medium of expression. By insisting on Yiddish as an end in itself, we were narrowing our membership base to newly arrived immigrants and were doomed to gradual extinction. Canada, with a later Jewish immigration, was somewhat less affected. (The more realistic Canadians were on our side.) The older Poale Zion were on the defensive against the rabid anti-Zionist Yiddishists and were under compulsion to prove their loyalty. We had no such obligations.

The second main issue was whether youth could be political or not. Those trained in the European tradition saw no flaw in a "kid" of fourteen accepting a life commitment to a specific party program. The endless refrain was "when I was twelve, etc." We saw no hope in such an approach. No American organization would tolerate outright indoctrination of youngsters. We insisted that youth be educated, motivated, inspired, activated, but not indoctrinated. There was much arguing and quibbling on what constituted indoctrination and what was motivation. The lines were drawn on the issue of education versus a political program. The compromise was an agreement that we be educational up to the age of eighteen and political thereafter.

Our third fundamental point of issue was that of Palestinocentrism. Would we stress Hebrew terminology and culture and strive toward *chalutzit* and *aliya*, or would we be an American labor and socialist youth movement with Palestine sentiment? The issue had already been decided in fact but not in official statement. Our summer camping program was called "Camp Kvutza"; our songs were, in ever increasing numbers, Palestinian; there was a prevalent view that we should invite *sblichim* (representatives) from Palestine; collections for strike funds, May First celebrations, and other labor activities were decreasing. We had become true Zionists but were not fully prepared to admit the fact because our ideology clearly stated that the two goals of socialism and Zionism were of equal importance. The *pegisha* did not resolve the verbal conflict but did clearly indicate the need for *chalutzit* and Hebrew.

A fascinating issue was that of scouting. Some objected to scout-

ing on the grounds that it was capitalistic and militaristic. The majority favored it for its character-building values. Actually, no one knew exactly how it operated; and thus we argued about vague notions, rather than about a program. It is significant that for a long time thereafter, when everyone accepted the need for scouting in principle, the implementation was slow, disjointed, and not entirely effective.

On one point there was unanimous agreement—the need for a thought-out, systematic, graduated educational program. In the past there existed a “cultural program” which resulted in helter-skelter activity. Suddenly a pamphlet would be issued, then a political bulletin, a lecture tour; but nothing was cohesively planned and consummated. We all agreed that an educational department was needed to work out a system for different age groups and different levels. Since much of Moshe Cohen’s memo dealt with specific educational recommendations, there was no disagreement.

The net result of the *pegisha* was that the lines of future development were agreed upon, and Moshe Cohen was invited to return as national secretary. His memorandum, however, was not accepted as such but was recommended for specific analysis and decision to the future national executive committee.

During most of the ensuing year the national executive committee was busy crystallizing the recommendations. Finally we were ready for the decisive 1935 convention. We had agreed on the need for establishing an educational section of the movement, Habonim, and the only aspect on which we were not united was that of autonomy. Would Habonim be an autonomous organization, or would it be a department of the Young Poale Zion Alliance?

Early in 1935 Moshe invited Nachum Guttman to come from Minneapolis to the national office to head the educational department. We all lived together in Moshe’s apartment, and poor Yetta had to feed us all. We thus constituted a real kitchen cabinet. Many momentous decisions were made over spaghetti and coffee.

Nachum was all for autonomy. He had much less patience over fine wrangling. Often, before we had settled a question of the content of a bulletin, Nachum already had the mimeograph rolling and placed before us an accomplished fact. We would plead with him that this was unauthorized and undemocratic behavior, but Nachum didn’t know what we were talking about. His material began to flow, and it was good.

Nachum met with David and Minna Yaroslavsky who were, at one time, members of Hashomer Hatzair but were also Poale Zionists. They were in the process of establishing a youth movement, Netzach, in the Hebrew schools where they were employed. Upon learning about the contemplated Habonim they offered to merge their movement with Habonim. (It consisted of two children’s groups in Brooklyn and one in the Bronx.) Their condition was autonomy for Habonim, clear *chalutz* orientation, and Minna’s participation in the national educational department.

During the same period there was some preparation to organize Hechalutz Hatzair. People who wanted a pure *chalutz* youth movement despaired of the existing organizations, but said that if Habonim would accept a *chalutz* program, a rival organization would not be founded.

The national executive committee set up an educational department, headed by Nachum Guttman and including Minna and David. The department was charged with working out the details of the Habonim plan to present to the convention. A Palestinian teacher, Raphael Margolin, whose wife had been a cook at the Accord Camp Kvutza was consulted on Hebrew terminology. Scout handbooks were culled for appropriate techniques. Weeks were spent on working out the pledge, commandments, symbols, slogans, and badges. By fortunate coincidence pamphlets of Habonim from England and South Africa arrived in the office, and there was a vision of a world-wide youth organization in all English-speaking countries.

At the convention of the Young Poale Zion Alliance in Buffalo in October, 1935, there was the unanimous recommendation to establish Habonim; but there were two views on autonomy. Nachum and Moshe pleaded for complete autonomy. Katzman and Itzkowitz argued against the danger of setting up a Frankenstein and proposed an educational department of Young Poale Zion Alliance, to be known as Habonim. My own attitude was that there were advantages in autonomy, but I knew that the movement was not ready for it. Also, I was not convinced that we could entrust the new educational department with unchecked authority. In the vote of the national executive committee before the convention, I voted against autonomy with Katzman and Shorty Cohen. For autonomy voted Moshe Cohen, Nachum Guttman, Ben Cherner, David Wertheim, and Beba Halpern (representing the Pioneer Women).

The convention debated the matter furiously and heatedly. Autonomy was not accepted. The final decision was, nevertheless, a compromise; namely, Habonim was to be autonomous in educational matters, but subject to national executive committee decisions on all issues of politics, interorganizational representation, and other major policy questions. A representative of the national executive committee was to sit on the Habonim *merkaz*. All this was subject to the ratification of the Central Committee of the Poale Zion.

In the Central Committee we had the full backing of Hayim Greenberg, David Wertheim, Isaac Hamlin, and many others. The Central Committee approved, and we had clear sailing.

Thus Habonim was launched and our problems began. We had to justify expectations and promises.

SAADIA GELB, Kfar Blum, 1959

THE FOUNDING CONVENTION (1935)

At the conclusion of the discussion, the following resolution was adopted:

The Thirteenth Convention of the Young Poale Zion Alliance approves the setting up of Habonim as the children's organization of the Young Poale Zion Alliance. The governing body of Habonim shall be the Merkaz Habonim. The Merkaz Habonim shall be responsible to the National Executive of the Young Poale Zion Alliance, and the Mazkir Habonim shall be a member of the National Executive. The Merkaz Habonim shall be composed of members appointed by the National Executive.

The purpose of Habonim shall be to educate American boys and girls to the ideals of Socialist Zionism. *Chalutziut* shall be the central point, and a regard for Jewish and general socialist problems shall be vital portions of the program.

The Merkaz Habonim is empowered to continue the present organizational and educational set-up of Habonim and to make such modifications as may be necessary for the development of the organization.

From the MINUTES OF THE CONVENTION, 1935

In Memoriam

We honor the memory of chaverim who were at the Pegisha and Founding Convention and are no longer with us.

Ben Cherner
Shorty Cohen
Sara Enowich
Joel Entin
Joe Feldman
Kay Feldman
Moshe Goodman
Ruth Greenberg
Isaac Hamlin
Motel Kekst
Leon Lashner

Jacob Lemberger
David Pinski
Rachel Siegel
Harry Spoon
Eddy Steinfeld
Irv Sternberg
David Wertheim
David Yaroslavsky
Minna Yaroslavsky
Shmuel Zahler

יהי זכרם ברוך



Y.P.Z.A. Convention, Buffalo, 1935, where decision was made to form Habonim.

